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ABSTRACT

A British initiative that aims to identify, develop, and assess core skills in post-16 courses and qualifications is summarized in this bulletin. The first section discusses expectations regarding what core skills can achieve. The following section focuses on other purposes to which core skills could contribute, such as broadening the post-16 curriculum, creating opportunities for credit transfer, establishing continuity with the National Curriculum, and bridging the "academic-vocational divide." It also argues that although the current initiative alone cannot fully achieve all these purposes, it will provide a basis for them. The next section summarizes recent national developments from February 1989 through November 1990. Further Education Unit (FEU) activities in the area of core skills are then described. They include: recording of achievement; definitions, levels, and frameworks; and the important issues to be explored if the core skills initiative is to be successful, highlights what the initiative has achieved so far, predicts future developments, and comments on FEU's role. (YLB)

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The Core Skills Initiative

The recent initiative which aims to identify, develop and assess core skills in post-16 courses and qualifications has achieved a high profile nationally.

Doubtless this is partly because it focused initially on A and AS qualifications, which although taken by a minority always attract widespread public and political interest. However, it quickly became clear that all concerned were determined to identify skills which could be common to all post-16 schemes and particularly to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

Proposals concerning core curriculum, (though not always in terms of core skills) are by no means new. In 1983, a report produced by the eight GCE Boards suggested a common core of subject matter within certain subject areas. Within vocational schemes, CPVE, YTS and BTEC have all not only designed but implemented various approaches to core, and TVEI schemes have often extended these approaches to all post-16 learners within their scope.

The particular features of the present situation are:

- *widespread and active support which is coming from all political quarters and both sides of industry*
- *the constructive dialogue which has been established between:*
  - *— the national agencies which are involved with both schools and further education*
  - *— those responsible for certification and those involved in curriculum development*
  - *— the government department concerned with education and that concerned with training*
  - *— those government departments and their agencies namely NCC, SEAC, NCVQ and FEU*
- *an emphasis on common learning outcomes which could be recorded on future examination certificates and records of achievement, rather than (necessarily) common content*
- *a general desire to continually improve learning and attainment post-16, following the establishment of the national curriculum up to that age*

It is crucial to realise that the core skills initiative is about quality. It has the potential to guarantee that post-16 programmes deliver those levels of attainment in such fundamental things as problem solving and communication skills which most have the potential to do. This approach should re-assure those who might otherwise worry that traditional subject disciplines or occupational needs might be distorted. In fact, we all have an interest in being able to demonstrate to the general public that the overall capabilities of those who have been awarded (say) an A/AS level or a NVQ level 3 meet legitimate expectations.

It is for this reason, amongst others, that the FEU supports and is actively involved in the recent initiative. This bulletin summarises the developments so far, considers some of the expectations which have been built up, and discusses what the current proposals are likely to achieve. It concludes by providing information on how FEU is involved in both influencing and responding to the current developments.

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THE PURPOSES OF CORE SKILLS

Work is now proceeding on the definition of the skills proposed by the National Curriculum Council. (See the section on National Developments). There is no absolute definition of such skills. The definitions will be more or less useful, rather than true or false, and their utility can only be judged in the light of the purpose which they are to serve.

Several different purposes are being assumed for core skills and it is important to recognise that some purposes, though desirable in themselves, cannot be achieved through the core skills initiative, or by that initiative alone.

This point is crucial because attempts to achieve too much via the initiative could raise false expectations, and cause what *can* be achieved to be neglected or even rejected because of growing disappointment.

WHAT CAN CORE SKILLS ACHIEVE?

The main purpose of the core skills initiative as proposed to SEAC by the Secretary of State for Education in November 1989 was to ensure:

'that whether they go into employment direct or via higher education, all students need to be equipped to take their place in a modern economy as well as to be competent in every way to function in adult life generally.'

The initiative can lead to important and worthwhile developments and can go some way towards serving that purpose by:

- improving the level of achievement of core skills already present in current schemes by making their presence and assessment overt
- enabling individuals to transfer more easily from one route to another, by indicating what learning/ attainments can be used in the new context
- guaranteeing the quality of learning programmes by ensuring that all of them make full use of the opportunity which already exists within them to develop core skills - to make the rest come up to the standard of the best and to ensure that rhetoric at last matches reality.

All of the above can be done by identifying the potential which already exists within academic and vocational qualifications and learning programmes as currently conceived. As such, although there are considerable implications for staff development, there are probably no insurmountable problems as far as either resourcing or the 'politics' of education and training are concerned.

If, however, it is intended to *enhance* the scope of the qualifications considerably through the core skills initiative, then :

i) there will need to be national and local resourcing of the necessary enhancement;

ii) Lead Bodies and A/AS Subject Panels will have to be persuaded that such enhancement does not lead to what has been referred to as 'distortion'.

The question of 'distortion' must not be taken lightly: developments which go too fast or too far will also lose the motivation of the learners. On the other hand, if the initiative simply codifies what is already best practice, many might think that an important opportunity had been lost.

In order to guarantee the quality of learning programmes and improve levels of achievement, FEU advocates the creation of sets of 'criteria' relating to the development and assessment of core skills. It would then be possible to aim high, whilst accepting that the rate at which provision could be adapted to meet the criteria would be dependent upon financial and political realities.

These criteria would define the characteristics which:

i) all qualifications should possess if they are to recognise and reward attainment in the core skills;

ii) all good quality learning programmes should meet in order to foster core skills.

FEU has started work on the latter and further details appear later in this bulletin.

We have seen above what the core skills initiative can achieve but it might be helpful to discuss some of the other purposes which have been mentioned in connection with core skills. These include:

- broadening the post-16 curriculum
- creating opportunities for credit transfer
- establishing continuity post-16 with the National Curriculum
- bridging the 'academic-vocational divide'

The following section argues that although the current initiative alone cannot fully achieve all the purposes above; it will provide a basis for them.

OTHER PURPOSES TO WHICH CORE SKILLS COULD CONTRIBUTE

Although we believe that the purposes analysed in this section cannot be achieved via core skills alone, this does not detract from their importance or that of core skills. The point is that other developments need to continue alongside the core skills initiative in order both to promote these purposes, and to make use of the contribution which the identification and assessment of core skills could make to their achievement.

1. Broadening the Post-16 Curriculum

This is normally taken to mean broader content, though breadth can also refer to the range of experiences which can be offered to learners as an entitlement. Core skills can contribute to breadth in both these ways if further developments also continue alongside the initiative.

- **In order to provide a broader range of learning experiences there will need to be further development of:**
  - — a range of systems which support the learner. These will include action planning, guidance, review of learning and recording of achievement;.
  - — a variety of teaching and learning methods and environments. The first three core skills could be incorporated into qualifications without changing the content but there will be a need to change and adapt methods of teaching and learning. For example greater use could be made of supported self-study, open access workshops and work-based learning in both academic and vocational programmes;
  - — staff skills and institutional structures to cope with the implementation of these changes. All staff will be affected, as will the way they are organised, timetabled and resourced.
- **In order to provide greater breadth in terms of content, there will need to be further development work on:**
  - — the extent to which numeracy, IT and a foreign language can be incorporated into all qualifications. This has not yet been made clear although NCVQ has suggested future collaborative work on this topic;
  - — the development of the 'themes' as proposed by NCC. Again there needs to be detailed work done to ensure that these can be included as guiding principles for syllabus design;
  - — the role of AS qualifications within post-16 learning programmes, and methods of encouraging appropriate subject combinations.

2. Skill Transfer and Credit Transfer

One of the expectations of the core skills initiative is that it will assist transfer between courses, avoid unnecessary repetition of work and provide the accumulation of credit, either to transfer to another course or to carry forward towards the completion of a qualification at a later stage. This is particularly important whilst it is the case that, in post-16 education and training, so many young people leave two year courses after one year or less.

The current proposals may facilitate skills transfer. The move to credit transfer will need further consideration and development.

Skill Transfer: the core skills proposed by NCC are said to be transferable. The term 'transfer' usually refers to the use of a previously learned skill in a new setting. Even where this is not straightforward, acquisition of a skill in one context can lead to a reduction in the learning time required to apply the skill to a new context.

The ability, and willingness, to transfer a skill are themselves things which need to be fostered. This implies the need to plan for any skills to be practiced in a carefully chosen range of contexts. In addition, the development of a system of recording and assessment of the core skills would help to raise awareness in the teacher and learner of how and where transfer of the skills takes place. It would also provide feedback to learners enabling them to improve their performance.

Transfer can and does occur without formal credit being given for the achievement and is thus differentiated from credit transfer.

Credit transfer means that credit acquired towards one qualification is transferred to, and provides exemption from, some of the components required for the assessment of another qualification. It assumes some high degree of commonality between the assessed components although they may not be identical.

The commonality has to extend to subject matter or occupational context as well as skills.

This has led to the suggestion that 'common modules' should be identified, or developed, which might appear within both academic and vocational qualifications. In fact, it may be better to refer to these as common 'units of assessment', since the term

'module' is often used to mean a shared part of the learning programme.

Whilst units of assessment which are common to *all* qualifications may not be feasible, it may be possible to identify many which could be common to a number of related subjects or occupations. Some of these might be common to both academic and vocational qualifications.

The skills upon which common units of assessment are based need not be core skills. Indeed, they will often not be, insofar as the core skills have been successfully embedded within each subject or occupational area.

3. Promoting Progression and Continuity from the National Curriculum

There is a strong expectation that core skills will be the key to linking learning pre- and post-16, helping to provide a coherent structure of education, academic and vocational, until at least the age of 18.

However, core skills are only a part of what is to be linked. There needs to be continuity in terms of subject-based knowledge and understanding as well as in core skills. In order for progression to take place there must be a system of recording and assessing attainment post-16 which makes connections with that which is in place pre-16.

Progression and continuity might be established by the development of:

- a single national system of recording achievement linking achievement in National Curriculum subjects and core skills with the post-16 programme. It should make performance in the core skills more readily visible for the purpose of progression and continuity, as well as for selection for employment or higher education, by stating explicitly what the learner can do as well as what they know and understand;
- a coherent system of action planning, guidance, reviewing of learning and recording of achievement which should be part of an continuing process, developed pre-16 and continued post-16;
- an analysis of National Curriculum attainment targets and programmes of study to identify where the core skills are already present. There is as yet no direct equivalent of the core skills in the National Curriculum, since the latter is based on subjects;
- precise definitions of, and level descriptions for, core skills, which would be applicable to both A/AS and vocational qualifications. This would form the basis for progress from National Curriculum levels attained at Key Stage 4.

4. Bridging the Academic-Vocational Divide

Including core skills in both academic and vocational qualifications identifies the similarities and lessens the differences between the two but bridging the divide would also require other action.

- The development of the varied strategies previously suggested for the implementation of core skills could bring together academic and vocational staff.
- A credit transfer system between academic and vocational qualifications is needed. This is likely to require the development of common units of assessment (see paragraph on Credit Transfer).
- Core skills could nevertheless raise awareness of, and facilitate, the transfer of skills from one context to another even though the opportunities for credit transfer might be limited.
- The need to avoid separating learners into the academic and the vocational on invalid grounds. A/AS qualifications are sometimes seen as placing a higher value on intellectual skills, and vocational qualifications sometimes seen as requiring lower levels of ability. Learners are often guided towards one route or the other on the basis of these perceptions rather than on their individual needs and abilities.

Given that there are two separate and distinct routes post-16 - A/AS and NVQs - with different structures and objectives, a single curriculum initiative such as core skills will not be sufficient on its own to bridge what is partially a cultural divide.

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Although it may be that the core skills initiative cannot, on its own, achieve all that some may have expected of it, it is still crucial in that it has begun to address some of the issues of post-16 education and training which it is important to resolve. There is a need now for carefully staged development to ensure that the proposals can become a practical reality. Many of the changes envisaged have already begun through earlier initiatives, most recently TVEI, and there is now a need to use what has been learned to facilitate the implementation of the current proposals.

FEBRUARY 1989 Kenneth Baker in a speech to ACFHE proposed a core curriculum for further education.

NOVEMBER 1989 CBI published *Towards a Skills Revolution* which advocated Common Learning Outcomes for all learners over 16. Additional reports by the TUC *Skills 2000*, HMI *Post-16 Education and Training*, *Core Skills* also emphasised the importance of core skills.

NOVEMBER 1989 The then Secretary of State, John McGregor, asked the NCC in consultation with FEU, SEAC, NCVQ and the then Training Agency, to report by the end of March 1990 on which core skills could be defined and incorporated into the study programmes of 16-19 year olds taking A/AS courses. He also asked SEAC to advise by July 1990 on which core skills could be promoted across all A/AS syllabuses. Consideration had also to be given to teaching and learning strategies, assessment and credit transfer.

MARCH 1990 NCC produced its response to the Secretary of State *Core Skills 16-19*.

This proposed the following list of core skills in two groups:

Group 1
1. Communication
2. Problem-solving
3. Personal skills

Group 2
4. Numeracy
5. Information Technology
6. Competence in a Modern Language

and stated that:

— 1-3 should be developed in all post-16 programmes and embedded in every A and AS syllabus. Assessment as part of the qualification was strongly recommended;
— aspects of 4 and 5 which match A and AS subjects should be embedded in syllabuses;
— access to additional studies in 6 should be part of entitlement;
— evidence of attainment in 4, 5 and 6 should be drawn from A/AS subjects and other sources.

Learning objectives should be described by attainment targets and statements of attainment. This would provide a link between units and elements of competence in NVQs.

The proposal recommended that the following systems should also be incorporated:

- the use of individual action planning o an continuing system of guidance o a national record of achievement

The National Curriculum themes of:

- environmental education
- education for citizenship
- careers education and guidance
- health education
- economic and industrial understanding

} with the emphasis on social and economic understanding

were considered essential in the post-16 curriculum and should be extended to develop:

- scientific and technological understanding
- aesthetic and creative understanding

APRIL 1990 NCVQ published *Common Learning Outcomes: Core Skills in A/AS Levels and NVQs* (R&D Report No.6). This contributed to the development of NCVQ's official policy document of July 1990.

MAY 1990

The Secretary of State endorsed the NCC proposals 'in principle' and invited NCVQ, in consultation with FEU and SEAC to submit comments by July about the possibility of including the core skills in NVQs.

JULY 1990

SEAC responded to the Secretary of State and accepted that the core skills could be incorporated into individual A and AS level syllabuses and assessed as part of the qualifications.

There was concern however that:

- detailed definitions of core skills needed to be written
- although the first three core skills could be integrated into all syllabuses there could be a problem with assessing personal skills as part of the final A/AS grade
- the overt inclusion of core skills within A/AS syllabuses should neither distort the character of subjects nor put at risk the integrity of A/AS courses.

JULY 1990

NCVQ submitted a response to the Secretary of State which proposed that:

- NVQs must include attainment in the 'fundamental' or 'transferable' core skill areas of problem-solving, communication and personal skills, with increasing levels of competence required at each NVQ level
- the core skill requirement set for NVQs at level 3 would be comparable to that set for the A/AS curriculum
- core skills should normally be developed and assessed within a subject or occupational area providing this could be achieved 'naturally'. If it should be necessary to add extra components, an attempt should be made to make them relevant to the needs of employers and the employment opportunity of trainees
- a progressive set of units in numeracy, information technology and modern language competence be developed in association with SEAC and NCC

SEPTEMBER 1990

During the Summer of 1990 meetings were held between FEU, NCC, SEAC and NCVQ to discuss the next stage of the work on core skills. It was suggested that a small task group of four experts in standards specification for Lead Industry Bodies, National Curriculum, A/AS and post-16 work be established to work full-time until January 1991.

The Task Group has been asked to develop definitions of core skills, to develop statements describing the expected graduated range of attainment/performance within each core skill, to propose a system for reporting achievement in each core skill, and to develop appropriate common terminology for the above.

A monitoring group was set up to steer the work, comprising the four national agencies plus TEED and DES as observers along with Scottish and Welsh representatives. The Task Group is to make its recommendations to the Monitoring Group by January 1991.

SEPTEMBER 1990

SEAC produced *Draft Principles for A/AS Examinations*. This was sent to all colleges, schools and other selected organisations, including FEU.

SEAC proposed that all A/AS syllabuses must offer development of core skills and cross-curricular themes, and that each syllabus should state these, along with a statement of how the assessment of core skills will contribute to the final grade awarded.

SEAC invited responses from LEAs and others by 26 October 1990.

NOVEMBER 1990

The Secretary of State endorsed the need for fuller definitions of core skills to see how far they could be sensibly built into NVQs and A levels, and meaningfully assessed and reported on, without distorting the essential nature of the qualifications.

He requested further work from all the national bodies involved, including FEU, not only on definitions of core skills but exemplification of the processes of their incorporation into qualifications, assessment and reporting.

CORE SKILLS - FEU ACTIVITIES

Since the publication of *A Basis for Choice* in 1979 the FEU has kept the idea of a curriculum based on an identifiable common core of learning at the forefront of curriculum development. *A Basis for Choice (ABC)* is the starting point because so much of what is advocated has been incorporated into further education curricula since then in one form or another.

In subsequent publications such as *Vocational Preparation* the FEU advocated the following as being the entitlement of all in the further education phase, whether on a vocational or academic route:

- a core expressed in terms of a checklist of objectives and learning experiences which would promote skills such as communications, numeracy, social skills, but also include such things as political literacy and careers education
- formative assessment
- guidance
- activity-based learning
- work experience
- national accreditation

Similar principles are at the heart of the current proposals for the development of A/AS and vocational qualifications.

Throughout 1990 FEU has been one of the national bodies involved in the work on core skills first initiated by the then Secretary of State Kenneth Baker.

FEU development officers worked closely with the NCC working party throughout the preparation of *Core Skills 16-19* (the response to John McGregor). Two development officers were members of SEAC Working Parties whose work led to the report to the Secretary of State in July of this year. FEU officers are now liaising as appropriate with the members of the National Task Group on definitions and levels of core skills and are members of the Monitoring Group (see Summary of National Developments).

Although core skills work is seen as permeating much of the work done by FEU there are also several strands of activity relating specifically to this area. Three development officers have allocations of their time for this work and all regional development officers spend some of their time on core skills. One development officer is responsible for overall co-ordination of the core skills area.

We are currently concentrating on the following activities:

1. RECORDING OF ACHIEVEMENT

Although there is general agreement in post-16 work that a single national system of recording achievement is needed, there are many different interpretations of what is meant by this.

An FEU working group is preparing a design brief for a national system of recording achievement. This is not an attempt to produce one national record of achievement to be used by everyone but rather a single *system*, which could be used with both academic and vocational programmes of study, allowing for the actual records of achievement to vary if necessary.

A specification should be available for discussion by December 1990.

2. DEFINITIONS, LEVELS AND FRAMEWORKS

The work of the national Task Group working on the detailed definitions of core skills and the issue of levels of attainment in core skills in A/AS qualifications and NVQs, is being shadowed by an FEU working group. This is to enable them to act as a resource for the Unit and the national group, as well as entering into dialogue, sharing expertise, and assisting the Task Group where appropriate with the tasks they have been set.

3. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CORE SKILLS

This work relates to the proposition that there are certain criteria which need to be met by all learning programmes, academic and vocational, which contribute to the fostering and recognition of core skills.

We are currently investigating four elements:

- planning for and development of core skills in the learning programmes by course teams
- action planning for core skills based on pre-16 performance
- implementation of core skills through teaching and learning strategies
- processes of reviewing the learning of core skills and their recording and assessment

Development work on the criteria is continuing with 12 colleges across four regions. This involves a minimum of two courses/programmes of study in each college representing a range of learners e.g.

full-time, part-time, A level, NVQ, adult. Regional development officers are managing the project with the colleges in the four regions.

Once draft criteria have been tried out and evaluated, they may be modified and will form the basis of guidelines for the implementation of core skills. The criteria can also be seen as relevant for the development of good quality learning programmes in general.

CONCLUSIONS

1. ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Despite a general optimism about the recent core skills initiative, there are some other important issues which need to be dealt with if it is to be successful:

- Lead Industry Bodies/Examination Boards. Some still need to be convinced of the value of core skills and all of them will need to be consulted and involved in the development of core skills.
- Adults. Many adults and others in further education, do not follow full time programme of three A levels and their needs must be considered as part of the developments. 'Access to Higher Education' courses are seen as helpful models for the future.
- All staff will need to become aware of the core skills and to be involved in their development within qualifications. In particular, there is likely to be a significant emphasis on the importance of certain learning styles.
- Resourcing - there will be an increase in the use of resource based methods of learning in education generally, not just because of core skills, but the initiative may emphasise the need for this. The increasing use of action plans and records of achievement will require adequate support.

2. WHAT THE CORE SKILLS INITIATIVE HAS ACHIEVED SO FAR

- It has brought to prominence the need for a high quality post-16 curriculum which will meet the needs of individuals, employers and society as a whole.
- It may represent the first stage of the creation of a more coherent system of education and training post-16.
- It has brought together, for the first time, policy-makers and practitioners in the academic and vocational spheres, who are working collaboratively towards a common outcome.

3. THE FUTURE

Although it is difficult to predict exactly what course the developments will take, the following are now likely to happen:

- continuing national development work on definitions and levels of core skills
- collaborative work on the exemplification of how core skills can be incorporated into qualifications
- the implementation of core skills into A/AS qualifications and NVQs levels 1-3 by 1994

4. WHAT FEU'S ROLE WILL BE

- to continue to influence and inform the national core skills developments;
- to keep those involved in further education up to date with developments;
- to test and disseminate the outcomes of our own core skills related work.

For further information on:
The methods of developing core skills, plus general enquiries: contact Sue Rawlinson
Records of Achievement: contact Paul Coates
Definitions and levels of core skills: contact Angela Cross-Durrant
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